

Were I to be lazy I could just use the following from their website: Enthusiastic, keen, talented... A first-class symphony orchestra... Top-class musicians between ages of 14 and 20... Passionately in love with music... But Saturday's concert in Perth Concert Hall showed the JeugdOrkest Nederland to have excellence beyond that.

They began with a showcase of orchestral virtuosity and colour: Rimsky-Korsakov's Capriccio Espagnol. The fanfare-like opening had dash and attractiveness. The clarinets showed themselves as stars and the orchestra's leader, Jos Jonker, showed herself of virtuosic solo quality. The night music of the slow section was colourfully impressionistic. Under Jurjen Hempel's compelling conducting the swagger and bravura of the final accelerando showed the orchestra's joy in music making.

Bloch's Schelomo (Solomon), subtitled Hebraic Rhapsody, had world-class cellist Pieter Wispelwey as soloist. The cello's overall mood was introspective and brooding, while the orchestra typically intervened with statements of impassioned drama. Together they did, as Bloch himself wrote, reveal "the complex, glowing, agitated soul..." Pieter Wispelwey's identification with the solo part was total. The fast second section showed filmic glitter from the orchestra with rounded, ringing, heavy brass and weighty depth of tone from the violins.

The final programmed work was Mahler's Symphony No.1. It had an atmospheric opening with harmonics, and the nature noises of German Romanticism from woodwind, horns and off-stage trumpets. Perky playing launched a lively Allegro, contrasted with a hushed tone for the mysterious central section. Violins and growling brass built up a surging release, continuing with glorious playing. The cellos and double-basses really dug into the Scherzo showing rhythmic energy. This was a nice contrast with the sweetness of the Trio and Willem Roos beautifully turned oboe.

Rather than the score's solo Jurjen Hempel had all eight of the double basses play the opening of the macabre third movement. The Klezmer-style and ironic col legno were well handled, as was the beauty of tone of the violins in their muted section.

The apocalyptic Finale had a magnificently stormy start with superb percussion. No mere noise makers throughout they added musical weight to the playing. Mahler adds "mit großen Ton" (with great tone) to his score and the sentiment of the singing lines of the violins brought that out. As the work turns to the major and heroism comes in for a happy ending, Mahler adds "triumphal". And with the eight French horns standing as per the composer's instructions, it certainly was.

As a calming encore the strings of the Netherlands Youth Orchestra gave an unaffectedly warm-hearted performance of the second movement of Elgar's Serenade for Strings.

Ian Stuart-Hunter